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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on facilitating students' autonomy. Though the main observed difference in the classroom often seems to be the student's level of language knowledge, this may have its roots in other reasons besides ability (previous teaching, motivation, etc.). Therefore, learners have not only different cultural and social backgrounds but also different learning styles and learning preferences. In a large heterogeneous class, one of the ways to facilitate students' autonomy is to give them a chance to become more responsible and independent. (Author/Ask)

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Facilitating Students¥ Autonomy

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on facilitating students' autonomy.Though the main observed difference in the classroom often seems to be the level of language students knowledge, we think, this may have its roots in other reasons besides ability (previous teaching, motivation, etc.).*

Therefore, learners have not only different cultural and social backgrounds, but also different learning styles and learning preferences.

In a large heterogeneous class one of the ways to facilitate students'autonomy is to give them a chance to become more responsible and independent.

Keywords: *autonomy, awareness raising, learning styles, language learning, ODL*

Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day.
Teach them to fish, and you feed them for life.

Traditional

Both students and teachers have their own established systems of assumptio.is and values. Teachers are often thought of being full of wonderful knowledge that they "pour into empty students". Some teachers, in their turn, often say that students who really want to learn will succeed whatever the circumstances in which they study, because students can succeed in what appear to be unfavourable conditions.

TOEFL lecturers at VSB-TUO mainly teach large heterogeneous classes, usually called "mixed-ability classes". When they say a "mixed ability class" most teachers mean a class of learners among whom there are marked differences in the level of performances in a foreign language. Very often they do not mean "potential learning ability". Though the main observed difference between students is the output and the amount of language they know, their present proficiency may have its roots in a lot of different reasons besides ability, for example:

- their learning experience
- lack of motivation
- preferred learning style
- previous teaching
- personality
- interests
- cultural background
- educational level
- self discipline
- confidence

M. Koslova

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And that is to name only a few.

One of the factors affecting the attitudes of students is their previous experience as language learners. If they were successful then, they are likely to be successful now. If they had a negative experience or dealt with failure, they might expect failure again, or they can have negative feelings about learning a language in general.

I have conducted a survey at the Department of Foreign Languages, VSB-TUO, about students' previous learning experience and their learning preferences. The results confirmed that during students' secondary education it was usual for teachers to have strong control over their learning. Students with less favourable educational background feel most comfortable when they are told what to do and how to do it, and they believe that they are not learning anything unless they are in a class with a teacher teaching.

I am not trying to denounce "old practices". After all, what can be more modern than Socrates' dictum "Know Thyself"? I think that there is no need to be too radical. There should be common sense and balance between

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"traditional" and "modern" approaches.

What can teachers do about students' attitude?

We cannot "teach" students everything, especially if we have only 120 hours of classroom language teaching time (90 minutes a week, 15 lessons a term, the first and the last lessons being mainly organizational). Besides, time and funding available for classroom language teaching is limited and is not likely to increase in the near future. It is clear that teachers should be realistic and students have to be prepared to take some responsibility for their own learning.

Consequently, it is important to educate students (or at least give them the opportunity to learn) how to be good learners and help them develop their learning strategies.

People see things in different ways. According to Jane Revell, we all use a combination of representational systems, that is visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory. The last two, referring to our sense of smell and taste, are usually less dominant. We tend to use one system more than the others.

The traditional classroom has focused primarily on writing and listening. By "listening" I mean here the activities when the teacher is speaking and students are listening to the teacher. Students who are kinaesthetic might tend to lose out academically.

In order to help students to know how to make the most of their resources and become more aware of what sort of learners they are I used a test on sensory styles.

Even those students who already knew if they were visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learners considered the test useful not only because of the advice as to their learning styles and self development but also because they had a real aim for doing the activity and not only because their teacher told them to do so. Consequently, their motivation increased.

Reflecting on my own sensory style and exploring my own teaching preferences helped me to plan activities which incorporated all three styles into my own teaching programme in order to meet the needs of the majority of the students and not only of those who happen to share my preferences.

According to the feedback I received it was proven that the students expanded their repertoire of strategies and refined their knowledge of the learning process.

Another way of modifying students' attitudes and facilitating their autonomy is using Information Technology.

Internet is making the world "closer, smaller", it also brings the information explosion of the 21st century.

That is why it is necessary to teach/learn how to get, find, explore, select, store, retrieve, differenciate, sort out, combine, classify, remember, recall, present and use the information effectively, purposefully, how to make priorities, links, a hierarchy of important and less important information. Internet will certainly stimulate the nervous system and at the same time people with more logical ways of thinking, who are good at finding key words, "seeing" relations, using analysis, using deduction and generalisation as well as the imagination they have an advantage. Also people who are able to see the complexity of a whole process with attention to detail, not forgetting the time factor, are better "skilled" in using Internet. Also people who possess good organizational skills have better prospects of finding ways in respect of how to use Internet as a vehicle for facilitating their work.

As far as a language is concerned, English is the "number one" language - the tool of Internet communication.

Unfortunately, the increasing number of non-native speakers with different educational/social backgrounds brings its drawbacks in a way that the "purity" and correctness of English is put at risk (mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, vocabulary usage, phraseology, spoken versus written/formal versus informal forms of English, standard versus non-standard English, general versus technical English, English-speaking countries and their differences in English, mother tongue versus EFL/ESL etc.). On the other hand, it can have a positive effect in a sense that new words can be created.

We are already witnessing the enormous impact of technology on English and the Czech language. Sometimes it is quite difficult to find an equivalent which would express the meaning of the English word in the best possible way. That is why there are often no "real" Czech equivalents and Czech may sound artificial or even ridiculous. But I think it is just a question of getting used to the new situation. On the other hand, it is obvious that a lot of computer-literate people communicate most of their time in a "computerized language" and I think that the situation is getting worse. Less and less people read quality fiction or poetry; they have encounteres with "rubbish" Czech/English more and more, and thus, the beauty of a language is threatened.

As far as a language classroom is concerned, there are plenty of opportunities for teachers at various levels to choose from a variety of study materials on the Internet which suit their students' needs. I personally experienced a method in seminar tuition in Bristol School of Education. The students were given a task to make their own simple

Web page. After a brief initial instruction by the teacher about Internet and its use, they worked in small groups and by means of a Netscape program, or other "help programs" prepared in advance by the teacher on diskettes later handed out to the students, they deleted the original information and tapped in their own personal data. They were free to ask the teacher any question if they had any problems. The teacher was also very helpful showing them how to make a picture of themselves by means of one part of the computer accessories. Later on the students could print out their pages and had a lively discussion about the whole process. Thus, everybody could have feedback, so valuable in the learning process. When using "hands-on" experience techniques students learn effectively and are more motivated (learning by doing, an idea so proclaimed by Comenius - a Czech scholar who is considered to be the founder of modern language methodology). They challenged themselves and achieved the goal. Finally, the teacher gave them homework to get even more practical experience.

Teachers can also publish their own teaching materials (lecture notes) and written work of their students on the Internet for distance learning. Also a lot of joint international projects are possible through Internet, in English versions and other languages. Thus teams of international experts and researchers cooperate and make a positive contribution to tailor-made products, where not only subject matter, but also language is part of tuition.

Again, based on my own experience, I can give an example of these types of projects. Language teachers in close collaboration with other teachers specialising in different subjects (e.g. engineering) create modules - programs concentrating on specific technical/subtechnical vocabulary and subject matter covering e.g. one academic term, according to syllabuses. Using multimedia and hypermedia facilities, students aim at improving their knowledge of not only a particular subject, but also a target language. The improvement of language competence, with the use of all four-language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), can be supported by combining modern and traditional ways of learning/teaching. The programs are prepared first of all for self-access, which means that students work with them mostly outside "school hours", in libraries or at home.

Using the latest computer technology, a combination of multimedia plus Internet, language teachers and learners can exploit the integration of the facilities to offer a rich learning environment. In a multi-skill environment the learner has constant access to high quality sound, pictures, text, recording facilities, and movies. Learners can use reference works such as dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Some can be accessed by more than one person at a time over a computer network. It makes them particularly useful for schools and colleges. Texts can be printed or saved electronically and used in word-processing or text manipulation packages, thus offering a wealth of teaching and learning resources. A variety of text-free language activities or games with pictures and the high quality sound (native speaker) can also be offered. Learners can also edit and re-present a range of authentic sources. For example, video-based courses offer resources on various topics with instant access and replay, but also on-screen exercises, notebook, transcript and recording facilities for learners to record their own soundtracks. Some texts from newspapers can be searched by topic, keyword, and level of difficulty. The activities can be on an introductory level, including pictures, sound, exercises and tutorial help for developing reading comprehension skills. Texts can be printed out or loaded into a word-processor; it is useful for both learners and teachers wanting to exploit the material in a wide range of ways. Students can use IT-based models or simulations to investigate options as they explore aspects of real or imaginary situations.

Certainly modern teaching should ideally lead to a more profound knowledge for students and enhance the work of the teachers.

The role of a teacher "changes", becoming more of an organizer, the need of being IT skilled is inevitable, provided these programs are used in the classroom. Many teachers are afraid of being "replaced by computers". I personally think that these thoughts are based on not understanding the principles of computer assisted learning thoroughly. I am convinced that the teacher as a human factor will be necessary, irreplaceable, in answering questions, explaining, giving more authentic examples, correcting mistakes, supervising, helping, adjusting according to facial expressions and the body language of students, flexibly solving unpredictable on-site problems based on their own specific experience as a human being.

Some of the responsibilities of teachers (IT personnel) are to:

ensure the provision of adequate equipment, initiate staff IT training plan, develop school IT strategy, negotiate equipment purchases, manage and develop IT curriculum, monitor recording and assessment, assist the development of IT activities within departments, develop examination programs...

IT technician is very important to:

prepare all software, hardware and peripherals, *manage* repairs, act as network manager, assist staff and students, maintain the database...

Some important implications from research are provided to warrant particular attention.

1. The research Watson 1993 provided strong indications that the implementation of IT activities was primarily dependent on individual teachers' initiatives. The keen teachers, IT users who managed to obtain access to IT resources despite often encountering many difficulties. They demonstrated patience, initiative, and a

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willingness to experiment, and be flexible in their approaches to teaching.

2. Further, even with some individual teachers making effective use of the technology, it was seldom, or almost never, the case that there was any "cascade" use made of their experience and expertise, even with highly supportive colleagues in the subject peer group. Teachers would benefit from more planned opportunities to share their experience of using IT. It is probably an unrealistic goal to expect the majority of teachers to become similar in their approaches and skills. On the other hand, the sharing of expertise and experience could be used in some way towards all teachers providing a richer IT set of experiences for students.
3. Another main finding for teachers regarded particular pedagogic skills and understanding which contributed to their effective use of IT. Areas included a balance between knowledge and process, confidence, classroom organisation and management skills, and teaching styles specific to IT. These need to be addressed in programmes for teachers' professional development.

The major outcome from the research was that in particular circumstances IT had a highly positive impact on students' achievements. The nature of the use, exploratory or enquiry focused, indicated that students' use of IT, which is exploratory and provides students with opportunities to make decisions and make choices, was demonstrated to promote a higher level learning outcome.

The circumstances involved:

- student access and opportunity
- teacher characteristics and abilities
- school support

The issues raised are complex, and cannot be reduced to short-term recommendations. The research was not designed to indicate any quick solutions. On the other hand, the results of the research point to a number of areas which need consideration in the development of a long term strategy for enhancing educational opportunities. This places additional demands on teachers in planning, allowing time for students to review, reflect, and share ideas. The research indicated the important role of IT in facilitating such activity.

An important dimension in IT activities was the contribution of collaborative work by students. However, many students found it difficult. This indicates that providing opportunities for students to learn how to work effectively in such contexts is important. Teaching about the approach may need to be explicit - giving advice on strategies for working together and sharing and debating ideas.

As far as word processing skills are concerned, the study suggested that effort is necessary in terms of the development of word processing skills for the individual student/s to reach a level in which the "real" potential of the software is utilised.

Familiarity with IT is vital when considering employment prospects of the students. Students need to be helped to appreciate the role that computers perform and will perform in their everyday lives. They should be taught how to use IT to handle and communicate information in a variety of contexts.

Information Technology can increase the knowledge, creativity and productivity of students. That is why all who are concerned with IT should keep abreast of current developments and potential of IT.

As far as the European Union is concerned, the promotion of "lesser used languages" has lately been part of discussions concerning SOCRATES lingua projects. The projects should address the objectives of the design, development and exchange of teaching curricula, and the production of innovative teaching vehicles and materials. The projects aim to achieve this via the incorporation of new technologies, novel approaches and the adaptation of techniques from other areas to the area of language acquisition.

Czech is also among those languages. By means of electronic mail Czech students could communicate with foreign students using Czech; in the beginning informal conversation groups could be formed and later developed into formal e.g. Czech-English tuitions. The existing courses of Czech (e.g. London, Glasgow, Bristol, Wolverhampton Universities in GB) could be developed and new courses could be established.

Conducting conversational classes over a geographical distance could enable both interactive "real-time" learning, and also facilitate the use of email as an open learning forum.

Software normally associated with the qualitative analysis of data for ethnographic, anthropological and sociological purposes would be adapted to enable its use for purposes of second language acquisition.

Besides employing the software used for non-language purposes, the teaching of languages with an emphasis upon the context would be encouraged. Rather than relying only upon traditional methods and techniques of language learning, the students could access a corpus of materials and to experience elements of the target language as it occurs within its natural context, and thus create a more dynamic, "real life" learning experience.

Also another important requirement could be met, and that is the incorporating and developing of existing ODL

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strategies within its parameters. For example access for students registered at Ostrava (VSB-TUO) who are unable to attend the University on a "normal" basis. Thus the time/money waste of external students (dalkovy student) as well as postgraduates could be reduced. This is especially the case in Ostrava where the main University campus in Poruba and the Language Department are situated a long way from each other.

A challenging environment for disabled students with special educational needs could be created, supporting the idea of incorporating them equally into the whole of society.

Physically disabled students restricted in mobility could study via Internet, type their homework set out by the teacher and "hand it back" to the teacher via electronic mail/on a diskette, paper. Language exercises based on a combination of general English plus technical English (depending on the type of faculty) should stimulate improvement in language acquisition and meet the requirements of specific methodological and pedagogical principles.

Visually impaired students could use a computerised reading system installed for them in libraries. It consists of a document scanner linked to a personal computer with optical character recognition software, a speech synthetiser and a character enlarging software. This gives individual visually impaired students instant access to most printed material through the medium of synthetic speech and/or an enlarged text on the computer screen. Instructions on how to use the equipment are available in braille, large print and on audiocassette. Training can be given by a staff member or Students' Support Service.

Deaf students could learn different types of sign language.

Incorporating the cultural aspects of the participating countries would mean the creation of a corpus which would be based upon elements of the cultural traditions of all countries.

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